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# Using Co-Inquiry to Study Co-Inquiry: Community-University Perspectives on Research

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## Abstract

In the context of a rapid development of interest in community-university research partnerships, this article argues for a greater focus on collaborative reflexivity to enhance learning from the research process and contribute toward developing sustainable and ethical research collaborations. Incorporating perspectives of community and university participants, the article offers a case study analysis of a UK-based co-inquiry action research group. This group not only studied examples of community-university research collaborations, but also reflected on its own workings as an example of collaborative research in action—scrutinizing relationships of power, responsibility, and boundaries in the group (collaborative reflexivity). This article argues that research projects might be designed with space designated for co-inquiry action research or similar inquiry groups. These co-inquiry groups would serve as replacements or supplements to more traditional steering or advisory groups.

## Introduction

There is a burgeoning interest in community-university research collaborations and the mutual benefits these can bring for all participants. Over the last decade there has also been a gradual shift from a focus on participatory research where professional researchers design and manage a project with some participation from the people usually regarded as the objects of research. This shift has focused on an ideal of co-production where professional researchers and community partners have equal power and responsibility (Tinkler, 2012). Despite the value placed on equal research partnerships between universities and non-university participants in research, there are relatively few published accounts that combine the perspectives of both parties in reflecting on their experiences of the process of collaboration (examples include Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Hart & Aumann, 2013; Majnep & Bulmer, 1977; Sullivan, Kone, Senturia, Chrisman, Ciske, & Krieger, 2001).

This article offers an analysis based on perspectives of community and university partners involved in a research collaboration that took the form of a co-inquiry action research (CAR) group set up to examine the nature, challenges, and opportunities of universities and community-based organizations working together on research. It not only offers a range of perspectives on collaboration, but also a chance to get inside what Dumlaio and Janke (2012, following Thomson & Perry, 2006) refer to as the black box of little understood processes of collaboration.

## Background

The CAR group was established under the aegis of Beacon North East in 2010. Beacon North East was one of six beacons for public engagement in the UK and consisted of a four-year (2008–2011) collaboration between Newcastle and Durham Universities and the Centre for Life (a science center) in North East England with a particular brief to promote public engagement with research. When Beacon North East was established, it characterized its approach to engaged research as co-inquiry. This term was used in a generic sense to refer to collaborative research with both an action orientation and some degree of participation by non-university members.

Toward the end of the second year of Beacon North East, Sarah Banks proposed that a group should be set up, comprising academics and some of the community partners from their current research projects. The purpose of this group would be to study co-inquiry research by means of a co-inquiry group. This proposal arose from the desire of key academics to share experiences and a feeling of lack of clarity about the nature of co-inquiry.

With funding from Beacon North East and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, the CAR project started in January 2010. Its purpose was to share learning from Beacon North East partners about co-inquiry as an approach to community-university research and produce materials (co-inquiry literature review, case studies of co-inquiry research projects, a toolkit, and articles) of use to universities and community partners. The process would involve a

series of meetings, a major focus of which would be presentations and discussions of the collaborative research projects with which group members were engaged. This would give everyone a chance to participate in the group and reflect on real life examples from practice.

### **Co-inquiry Research**

Although Beacon North East used the term co-inquiry in a broad sense to refer to collaborative research, the CAR group was modeled on the idea of the co-inquiry group as promoted by Heron and Reason. This approach to research, also called cooperative experiential inquiry, was introduced in the 1970s (Heron, 1971) and developed over the following decades (Heron, 1981, 1996; Heron and Reason, 1997, 2000, 2008; Reason, 1994a). A co-inquiry group involves people coming together to define and explore an issue, problem, or question that is important for them. Co-inquiry groups use and value the knowledge within the group and work in a participatory and egalitarian way. The participants in a co-inquiry group work together as both co-researchers and co-subjects: that is, not only do they all play a role in the planning, process, analysis, and dissemination of the research (co-researchers), they also draw on their own subjective experiences from outside and inside the group as data for discussion and analysis (co-subjects).

Over time Heron and Reason and other colleagues developed a philosophy based on a radical or extended epistemology (particularly valuing knowledge gained through experience), a commitment to principles of equality (valuing and respecting all contributions), participation (active engagement of all members in the group), and a methodology based on cycles of reflection and action. A typical model of working entails a group moving through various phases. A group might start with participants coming together and focusing on purpose. Participants then become co-subjects (recording the processes and outcomes of their own and each other's experiences), before moving on to being fully immersed and engaged with their experience. Finally, the group comes back to reconsider or reframe the original questions/issues and/or formulate new questions and continue through the cycle again (Reason, 1994b).

### **The Beacon North East CAR Group**

The principles, methods, and process of the CAR group drew on the philosophy and models of co-inquiry groups as developed by Heron and

Reason but did not follow their methodology in detail. Since the facilitator had a background in community development, the group also drew on the principles and values of community development work (Community Development Exchange, n.d.; Ledwith, 2011; Ledwith & Springett, 2010), critical community practice (Butcher, Banks, Henderson, & Robertson, 2007), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972, 1993, 2001). These share a participatory worldview and egalitarian philosophy, but also emphasize analysis of power relations, challenging oppression, promoting empowerment of individuals and groups, and an action orientation toward transformational change. The working of the CAR group was also informed by principles and methods of dialogical learning, especially as developed in neo-Socratic dialogue, with an emphasis on listening and developing mutual understanding (Saran & Neisser, 2004). The principles listed below were important in setting up and facilitating the group.

*1. Valuing alternative ways of knowing.* One of the main aims was to create knowledge through learning from the experiences of participants, all of whose perspectives were regarded as equally valuable. This relates to Heron and Reason's (2008) argument for an extended or radical epistemology (theory of how we come to know the world) as an alternative to the traditional academic privileging of theoretical, abstract, propositional knowledge (intellectual knowing of ideas and theories, knowing about). This extended epistemology identifies three other types of knowledge in addition to the propositional, namely: experiential (gained through direct face-to-face contact with a person, place, or object, based on empathy and resonance); presentational (grows out of experiential knowing, expressing it through story, movement, drawing, etc); and practical (knowing how to do something, a skill or competence; this brings together the other forms of knowing into action in the world). This is also referred to in other literature as an epistemological shift (Welch, 2002) or a new epistemology (Schön, 1995) that focuses on a reflective and applied approach to research.

*2. Awareness of differing positionalities and power of group participants.* While the group was set up with a commitment to an egalitarian philosophy and participatory approach, members were aware of the potential for academic voices and interpretations to dominate. This issue was kept on the agenda throughout the year and one of

the main ways of distributing power in the group was through using exercises that gave space for all to contribute (such as rounds and pair work), encouraging serious listening and valuing of each contribution.

3. *Phases of reflection and action.* The group was based on a familiar model of experiential learning, alternating between phases of reflection and action (Kolb, 1984; Freire, 1972; Heron, 1996). Members planned future actions of the group and brought case examples for discussion, which then enabled them to reflect on the processes of community-university collaboration. They also continued working in their research collaborations outside the group and reflected on these processes and on the processes of the CAR group itself. The reflections in the group were often dialogical, with group members sharing their perceptions and views, listening to others, identifying commonalities, and developing shared understandings.

4. *Awareness and use of group processes.* The group was deliberately set up to mirror the process it was studying—the relationship between community and university participants in collaborative research. This meant that all participants were aware of, and from time to time discussed, the roles people played within and outside the group (especially the distinction between academic and community participants), levels of participation, inclusion and exclusion, and the use of power and language. Reflections on group dynamics provided some of the data for analysis of how community-university research collaborations work, and reflections of members on their own positions and contributions in the group (reflexivity, see Finlay, 2002) were particularly useful in this.

5. *Search for transformational as well as informational outcomes.* In addition to finding out how the process of community-university collaboration in research worked, including identification of challenges and elements of good practice, the aim was also to enhance the capacity of group members and others in the wider community and universities to undertake this kind of research. In Heron's (1996) terminology, the group was seeking both informational and transformational outcomes. In community development terms, it was aiming for individual and collective empowerment to enable participants to work for progressive social change in their communities (Banks & Vickers, 2006; Community Development Exchange, n.d.).

## **The Organization of the Group**

The project was coordinated and meetings facilitated by Banks, with Andrea Armstrong as researcher (responsible for a literature review, collation of materials for case studies, and recording meetings). The group met on six occasions between April 2010 and April 2011. It initially comprised five members of community groups (one paid worker and four voluntary activists), five academics, an academic as facilitator, a researcher, and one staff member from Beacon North East. Participants were selected and invited by Beacon North East staff, with academic participants comprising the Beacon North East theme leaders and the community partners coming from two projects. After the first meeting, one community partner withdrew (for family reasons), leaving four community partners from the same organization.

The six meetings were each three hours long and provided a space to share and develop ideas, comment on presentations from group members, and materials produced by the researcher. Meetings were structured by the facilitator and generally comprised a round of information sharing, a case study presentation, feedback and discussion, pair and small group work, and deciding next steps. Actions to be taken by group members were identified and the researcher collated more materials for the next meeting.

The meetings were audio-recorded and detailed notes were circulated to members to ensure accuracy of reporting. The notes from meetings and additional interviews with CAR group participants by the researcher and evaluation questionnaires completed at the end of the meetings were used to inform this article. These materials formed the basis of toolkits and case studies ([www.durham.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/toolkits](http://www.durham.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/toolkits)). The writing process was collaborative, with the researcher and facilitator pulling materials together and circulating to members for editing and comments.

## **Developing a Way of Working**

*Presenting a literature review: exposing the group to academic jargon*

Since part of the brief of the CAR project was for the researcher to produce an initial literature review on co-inquiry and related approaches, it was decided to present this at the first meeting. This overview of the literature was followed by presentation of a case study of a community-university collaboration by members of a community group. Despite attempts to summarize the findings of the literature review in a way that was comprehensible

and relevant, this clearly failed, as illustrated by the comments of two community participants:

From the outset it was quite daunting.... For me this was new. The academics genuinely wanted to know our opinions. I must admit that at first I thought it was over my head and at the first meeting, me and a colleague were ready to call it a day. We decided to stick it out for a couple more sessions.

Did not have a clue what to expect or what was expected of me. During the meeting I felt out of my depth and that I could not contribute in any way. The jargon used by others put me off straight away. Having a cigarette break during the meeting, my colleague and I just stood laughing at each other, both having the same thought that we were from another planet.

#### *Presenting case studies: grounding the group in practice*

Fortunately, these two community participants stayed, and after the break they presented, with others, their case study on the work of their community organization (Thrive) and their research collaboration with Durham University. This provoked intense interest among other participants, as Thrive had been involved in campaigning and community action in relation to high interest loan companies ([www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/researchprojects/debt\\_on\\_teesside](http://www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/researchprojects/debt_on_teesside)). The community participants showed a video they had made to highlight the unethical practices of doorstep lenders and explained how university staff and students were involved in working with them to collect, analyze, and write up supporting research data.

The following three meetings included presentations on research projects in which group members had been involved, followed by discussion and analysis. These presentations served to ground the group in experiential and presentational knowledge, giving different people a space to contribute and enabling the group to compare and contrast experiences and begin to identify common themes and issues. Although the comments from the community participants quoted earlier suggest that the group had a rocky start, it gradually recovered from this as academic jargon and theorizing were put aside and discussions focused on practical experiences and reflections on experiences in a way that all could contribute.

#### *Listening and asking questions: becoming a group*

Interestingly, in the presentation of the research based at the community organization, Thrive, the community participants used some specialist terminology from the field of community organizing ([www.gamaliel.org](http://www.gamaliel.org); Alinsky, 1969; Pyles, 2009), which some of the academics did not understand—for example “cutting an issue” (choosing an issue on which to campaign), one-on-ones (face-to-face meetings with key people to engage them) and self-interest (individual interests around which a campaign can be mobilized). This first meeting served an important purpose in alerting participants to the potential for the worlds of academia and community action to seem mutually inscrutable. Indeed, it was not only the community participants who felt unsure or excluded at the start. Some of the academics had not met previously and were also hesitant, as comments from three university participants show:

I did have concerns about what I had to offer to the group: whether my own work was relevant, and my capacity to make a useful contribution.

I think I felt a little bit on the outside to begin with.... I was aware some people had well-established relationships... whereas for me I knew no one at the table.

I felt a bit like a fish out of water. It was clear that several of my colleagues were very familiar with co-inquiry research, an approach which to me was very new.

However, like all groups (Brown, 1994; Doel, 2006), this one went through stages and quickly settled down as participants expressed genuine interest in each other's perspectives, academics tried to avoid jargon and over-intellectualizing, and community participants felt respected and were prepared to challenge and ask questions. As one community participant remarked:

At one meeting we were discussing the problems of engaging with the university and one point was the language or the amount of academic jargon being used. They listened to me and took on board what I said and it was plain sailing from then on.



Reflecting on the group process, two academics commented: “By the end of the process, it felt like we had become something of a team,” and “We became a group rather than a bringing together of people from different disciplines and stakeholders.”

### Exploring Together

Once the group was established, its main focus was on discussing and analyzing four case studies of community-university collaborative research projects. These are summarized in Table 1 and were presented by members of the CAR group and explored in detail (for fuller accounts see [www.durham.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/toolkits/](http://www.durham.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/toolkits/)).

The emphasis in the group’s examination of the case studies was not on research findings, but rather on reflecting on the process of academics and community participants working together within the context of their projects and identifying issues, challenges, what worked well, and lessons learned. This allowed members to reflect on their own roles in their research projects and created a space to analyze each other’s accounts in a critical but supportive environment. The process of exploring together highlighted a number of issues and challenges when working collaboratively in co-inquiry groups and/or partnerships.

### Reflecting Together on the Challenges of Collaborative Research

At the fifth meeting, the group took stock of the case studies (written up in draft by the

researcher) and earlier discussions in order to summarize key challenges in community-university collaborative research and identify points of good practice. The discussion drew on the issues raised by the case studies, and also on analyses of how the CAR group itself functioned as a community-university collaboration. Many issues were identified, a number of which formed the basis of the good practice guidance (Beacon North East, 2011a). There were two challenges upon which the group focused much attention—one raised by community partners and the other by academics. These were: community partners’ concerns about academic language and ways of working (based on experiences in early CAR group meetings) and academics’ interest in how they managed multiple roles and identities, including becoming personally involved and “going native” (based on reflections on the case study presentations).

#### *Community partners’ concerns about academic language and ways of working: “different planets”*

On a number of occasions, community participants raised the issue of academic language. Although it was clear that this was about more than just language or the use of jargon, this was a useful focus for an issue that was also about differences in class, status, wealth, and power. It was about the power of academics to set and control agendas and to patronize or exploit (whether consciously or unconsciously) community participants. As one community participant said afterwards: “What appeared to me at the first meeting was a group of

**Table 1.** Case Studies Examined by the CAR Group

Case Study Title	Brief Description
1. Collaborating for social justice: a community-university partnership (Beacon North East, 2011b)	A long-term partnership between Thrive and academics in the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action (Durham University). It started with an approach from Thrive to an academic for help with research on sustainable livelihoods and led to university support for several Thrive-initiated research projects, university staff attending Thrive community organizing training, and a large research grant on household debt managed jointly by Thrive and the University.
2. Digging where we stand: a research collaboration between older people and planning students (Beacon North East, 2011c)	A community–university research partnership in Newcastle involving postgraduate architecture and planning students working according to instructions drawn up by The Elders’ Council and the Quality of Life Partnership. Students worked with older people in two diverse neighborhoods to draw out qualities of those areas that were supportive or detrimental to older residents’ quality of life. The project developed from the Newcastle University staff member’s research interest in aging and her involvement in the Quality of Life Partnership for many years.
3. Developing Durham Local Food Network: the role of a Master’s student (Beacon North East, 2011d)	A one-year project involving a Durham University master’s student undertaking research for her dissertation with a view to promoting the Durham Local Food Network and raising general awareness of organically grown local food among the local community. The project grew out of a relationship between one of the research supervisors and the founder of the food network who knew each other through mutual interests in transition towns and permaculture.
4. Developing low carbon neighbourhoods: a collaborative action research project in Newcastle (Beacon North East, 2011e)	A partnership project between two universities, a city council, two energy charities, a housing co-op, tenants’ associations, a housing association, and others to promote community engagement in relation to energy-demand reduction in fuel poor neighborhoods in Newcastle. Building on previous collaborations between some of the partners, a Newcastle University member of staff gained a Beacon North East fellowship to take the research further.

learned people having to put up with a commoner like me.” This is the same person who laughed with her colleague at the first meeting, thinking they were “from a different planet.”

However, at later meetings the academic language issue was raised again and university participants took it seriously. It was important to tackle this, not just for the purpose of including community participants, but also because the academic participants were from different disciplines. There was a danger the social sciences and social research methodologies would dominate. Yet it was broader than just language, as the group facilitator commented:

It was also about academic culture and ways of working. It’s hard to put your finger on it, especially when you are immersed in it, but we can easily fall into academic seminar mode if we are not careful. We hear a presentation and then ask questions, which may be in the form of a disguised critique. We minutely analyze and interpret what people say, test out an argument, or link it to a theoretical position. In the CAR group we needed to do something very different: We needed to stay with people’s experiences, communicate clearly, listen to each other very carefully, and build mutual understanding. That is, we needed to engage in dialogue rather than debate.

The group seems to have been successful in this respect. As the same community participant who spoke about being from a different planet commented:

Their jargon and way of speaking could have crushed me within seconds. My response to that would have been to leave, shout, or use expletives. But they treated me as they treated themselves: with courtesy, decorum, and respect. They made me feel an equal with something to contribute. They listened, dissected my argument so I could rethink a better way of explanation. They listened to me when I disagreed with them and explained fully things I did not understand. I joined as an outsider but left as a full equal even though I do not have letters after my name.

The CAR group may not have created a “new world,” but it did create a new space—a common ground where a productive community-university dialogue could take place. This space was not just an artificial bubble with no connection to the worlds outside, as the learning enabled participants to go back to their worlds and work in new and relevant ways, as described in the later section on benefits.

*Academics’ multiple roles/identities: Becoming personal and “going native”*

The issue of academics occupying more than one role/identity in their research projects was raised as a challenge by the university members of the CAR group. The community partners in the CAR group did not express similar concerns (although there are clearly challenges in taking on researcher roles in their communities), and it is worth considering why this is a recurring challenge for academics.

Negotiation of roles/identities that are not always complementary is perhaps more acutely experienced by university partners because it is often academics who become involved in the settings where community partners work or live (Farquhar & Dobson, 2004). This was the case in the four examples studied by the CAR group (although in the case of the CAR group itself the situation was reversed). Furthermore, university partners may feel the responsibility of the researcher role differently than community partners because that is their main working role. Other roles/identities may evolve unexpectedly for university partners and they may feel less experienced in them. For example, the academic researcher in Case Study 4 said he was “conscious that the role was different to [what I] expected” and one of the CAR group members commented that this academic’s role was “like that of a community development worker.”

In Case Study 3, the academic researcher and master’s student both commented on their multiple roles as researcher (with a funded university project to complete), student (taking courses in permaculture design taught by the community partner) and community activist (involved in local food and transition groups). This also happened in Case Study 1, as academics and students enrolled in training for community organizers and engaged in campaigns and public assemblies alongside their community partners from the community organization, Thrive.

In some situations, then, there is added complexity and potential conflict for the academic partners when their roles become

more than researchers and include being advisors or community activists. Being involved in a community project also entails a duty of care and responsibility, and relationships can become personal. CAR group members discussed the issue of conflicting roles, commenting that in Case Study 3, where the community partner was teacher, the academic partner ceded authority to someone else. Comments included: "It [research partnership] can become personal, part of your life and much more than a research interest" and collaborative research can be seen "as (life) long relationships which blur the lines between community/researcher/activist." One academic member commented on the tensions between commitment and dependency:

There has to be commitment from people who have a passion but you have to know when to draw the line, for example: skills to avoid co-dependency; how to manage expectations and hopes; feel that you can say 'no' and have time for yourself and that commitments are defined.

In Case Study 3, the master's student became so immersed in the project that she said in an interview with the researcher that she had "gone native" (see Gold, 1958):

I have "gone native" and almost become one of the subjects of my own inquiry. The fieldwork has not been an abstracted study about "them," but rather it has involved striking up real relationships with the people you are working with.

This comment encapsulates a recognized challenge for social science researchers, especially ethnographers playing a participant-observer role of adopting multiple roles/identities in the field (e.g., as researcher and activist). It also highlights the issues raised by being "inside" and "outside" the group that is the focus of the research (see Bachmann, 2011; Eyles, 1988).

### **Reflections Afterward on the Benefits of Participating in the CAR Group**

In February 2012, 10 months after the last meeting, the researcher sent participants questionnaires to evaluate their learning from the group and any outcomes that could be attributed to it. A number of themes emerged, which are elaborated upon below.

*1. Broadening of theoretical knowledge.* Several academics reported a greater understanding of the range of approaches to community-based participatory research (CBPR). This was propositional knowledge derived from the academic literature, particularly as presented in the literature review. As two academics commented:

It has broadened my field of vision concerning the wider body of knowledge about action research and public engagement. It has helped me to question how genuinely collaborative—in the co-inquiry sense—my work is or could be.

It opened my mind to a whole range of research topics that I had never thought about before .... I spend most of my time working with academics, industrialists, and business people whose background is in the hard sciences and engineering. Co-inquiry research is not commonly used in those circles, which is quite unlike the world that my new social science colleagues appear to inhabit. However, it is very clear to me that many of the serious obstacles to deploying the results of work in the hard sciences stem from a lack of engagement with people. We are probably missing a trick!

*2. Developing practical knowledge.* All participants reported developing practical knowledge and skills in how to conduct community-university collaborative research, particularly co-inquiry. For example, an academic commented that he had learned how to conduct a co-inquiry group and the CAR group had provided a platform (through the toolkit) for further co-inquiry projects. One of the community partners said: "My work is now more structured and researched with the right questions being asked. I have also won two awards for my work." This community partner has taken a lead in developing a toolkit for community partners engaging with universities (Beacon North East, 2012).

*3. Deepening sensitivity.* Several participants made comments relating to their greater awareness of the nuances of participatory research, and one academic commented that he had gained:

[A]wareness of language and discursive issues and their relation to inclusion,



exclusion, and ethical conduct in research; better appreciation of the nuances and dilemmas implicated in the foregoing.

The same academic also said that participation in the group had “deepened my appreciation of the issues to consider in working with various types of partners.” Another academic commented: “I now appreciate the degrees of community participation and researcher control and have a deeper insight into complexities of relationships.”

*4. Stimulating reflexivity.* As indicated earlier, several community partners were conscious of their class and educational backgrounds and how this influenced their participation in the group. Several academics reported a greater awareness of their role as university researchers, the potential for abuse of power, and conflicts between responsibilities to different organizations or groups. “Reflexivity” was not a term used in the CAR group (it could be regarded as “academic jargon”). However, in reflections afterward it became clear that the concept was useful—referring to the conscious placing of oneself in the picture and an awareness of one’s own position, values, and influence in a group or project. One of the academics mentioned that an effect of the CAR group for her was: “Perhaps being more conscious of my position and that of others.”

*5. Developing self-confidence.* Community partners in particular stressed the effect of participation in the group on their self-confidence, as one commented:

It has given me more confidence to express my beliefs and the structure behind them. Also to integrate more in the circles of people who could help my work progress (public speaking engagements, both in university and the community)... This collaboration has given me a self-esteem I have never had. I refused university when I had the chance and always felt in awe of the people who worked and studied there, but I learnt that I can contribute.

Academics also reported developing confidence, particularly in relation to contributing to the CAR group, as two participants commented: “Over time I became more confident about offering opinions and perspectives,” and “A generally supportive atmosphere helped me to develop con-

fidence in my own role, and I think this helped me to contribute more often and substantially.”

*6. Leading to further action.* When asked how the CAR group had changed what they were doing, several participants commented that they were taking on new projects based on the co-inquiry approach, as well as improving their existing practice. One of the community partners reported that she was:

Taking on bigger projects.... I am working with people to mentor them and become experts in their causes. Because of the CAR group I make things happen, not go with the flow. I am now an educator by experience.

An academic gave an example of how she had developed a new research project around the viability of co-housing for older people to a brief drawn up by an elders’ council:

This piece of work is being managed by a steering group that is mainly elders’ council members. This is a new approach in co-inquiry for me, though I have worked with steering groups before, set up by research funders. This was a conscious attempt to ensure that management of the project was not taken away from older people.

## **Conclusions: Developing Collaborative Reflexivity**

Much community-university collaborative research focuses on the aims, objectives, and tasks of the research itself, rather than the process of the collaboration—the black box mentioned at the start of this article. The four case study research projects that were the focus of the CAR group deliberations were typical in this respect. The participants were aware of some of the challenges of universities and communities working together, but had rarely talked about the process of collaboration in any detail or made the process a study in its own right. The CAR group showed the value of engaging in exploratory dialogue in a group. Participants were surprised at what they learned from each other and about themselves. They reflected not just on the collaborative processes in their own current and recent research projects and evaluated their roles, strengths, and weaknesses, but also studied themselves in the group and analyzed the

workings of the group. This provided a model for how to become more reflective and reflexive in the research process and demonstrated the value of experiential learning.

The process that the group went through could be described as developing a capacity for collaborative reflexivity—enabling individuals not only to reflect critically on themselves and the influence of their own power and positions in their research projects, but also stimulating a collective process. This included subjecting the structure and dynamics of the group itself to scrutiny and considering how these influenced the work it could do in studying co-inquiry.

Reflexivity as mutual collaboration or collaborative reflexivity is one of five types of reflexivity in research identified by Finlay (2002). However, her short sketch of collaborative reflexivity misses some of the dimensions identified in the CAR group. Finlay presents collaborative reflexivity of the type developed in co-inquiry groups as “offering opportunities to hear, and take into account, multiple voices and conflicting positions” (p. 220). However, she remains skeptical of the value of this process, which she suggests may be based on an egalitarian rhetoric disguising essentially unequal relationships. This is a valid point. In the CAR group, with academics in a majority and taking the roles of facilitator and researcher, parity of status was hard to achieve. However, arguably collaborative reflexivity is not just about hearing multiple voices; it is also engaging in critical dialogue so the many voices may position themselves in relation to salient categories such as class, gender, ethnicity, education, and status, consciously reflecting those positions and talking to each other about their positions and reflections. This began to happen in the group and has been taken further in subsequent CAR groups.

The CAR group offered a rare opportunity for reflection and reflexivity in a diverse group on ways of working collaboratively. While a steering group or advisory group is often included within research projects, these are usually task focused and do not allow much time and space for mutual reflection on the research process. There are enormous benefits to integrating a CAR group within a larger research project instead of, or alongside, the more traditional steering/advisory group. A CAR group can not only consider the research findings and how to put them into practice, but also examine the workings of the research project itself and draw out and create learning from the process of collaboration.

This was done on a small scale in a scoping study on ethics in community-based research (funded by a UK research council) that involved some of the same academics and community partners from the CAR group described here undertaking a literature review and participating in a second CAR group (Durham Community Research Team, 2011). This led to the drafting of ethical guidelines for CBPR and ultimately the publication of a guide and case materials as part of a follow-on project (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University and National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2012).

Building in a CAR group, or some other format for stimulating and developing the capacity for collaborative reflexivity, can take community-university collaborative research to a new level, developing stronger and more sustainable partnerships and promoting genuinely transformatory learning for individuals, groups, and communities. In terms of community-university engagement more generally, including university students and staff undertaking community service and community action, the concept of collaborative reflexivity can be a useful focus for stimulating shared learning and improved practice. Building in spaces where different parties can reflect honestly, acknowledging and exploring the impact of differentials in power, status, education, and wealth, can result in stronger partnerships, significant learning for individuals and groups, and stimulation of further collaborations of mutual benefit.

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